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ABSTRACT

The paper examines George Herbert Mead's account of the individual's relation to the physical world. Mead (1863-1931) taught social psychology and philosophy at the University of Chicago from 1893-1931 and is best known for his theory of self. This theory maintains that the self is formed in a particular historical context and that it includes self control and personality. Mead's major hypothesis regarding interaction between the individual and the environment is that the individual (the self) is fashioned out of a dynamic process of interaction and confrontation with the environment and other individuals. Mead's account of the individual's cognitive relation to the nonhuman environment has been largely overlooked by researchers. Specific aspects of his theory which should be examined more closely include definition of the self and its environment, the individual's consciousness of itself as a separate entity located in space and time, the discovery of self as a center of activity, and the social and cooperative nature of the self in relation to the physical world. The conclusion is that researchers in social psychology and the sociology of knowledge will expand their understandings of the self if they reexamine Mead's theory of the interrelationship between the social environment and the mental life of the individual. (DB)

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Getting an "Inside": The Role of Objects in Mead's Theory of Self

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George Mead was an original and creative thinker who directly influenced the progress of American sociology in its first decades and also future phases of the discipline. It was during the 1960s that the impact of Mead's writings became dramatically public to the discipline through the development of symbolic interactionism and in phenomenological sociology. As in the case of other creative thinkers, it may take several decades to absorb the insights to be found in the entire corpus of Mead's writings.

One of the many aspects of Mead's work which remains to be explored is his account of the individual's relation to the physical world. For Mead, the individual, the minded organism or self, is fashioned out of a dynamic process of interaction with objects and other selves. The human being's unique capacity to view itself as an object within the field of its own experience, its capacity to think--to manipulate linguistic symbols, is dependent upon its relationship to the inorganic, the organic, and the human social system. The human organism confronts and is confronted by each of these systems of reality simultaneously.[1]

Mead's account of the individual's cognitive relation to the non-human environment has been largely overlooked by the symbolic interactionists who have focused on the structures of interaction of selves within the process of linguistic communication. A second look at Mead's approach could, I believe, provide a foundational approach for sociology's understanding of the interaction of the self and the physical environment. In addition, it could provide new and provocative ideas for the disciplines of social psychology and the sociology of knowledge. The topics treated here have been selected precisely because they contribute to these substantive theoretical fields. These topics include: the function of objects in the definition of the bodily self and its environment; the phenomena of resistance and interiorization in the self's contact with physical things; the self's identification with the world of physical objects; the primacy of touch in the constitution and maintenance of reality; the inherently social converse of selves with the physical world.

The function of objects in the definition of the bodily self.

The individual's consciousness of itself as a separate entity located in space and time emerges as it confronts the world of others and other things. The social and physical world arises in experience through distance

senses and contact experience. Through vision and the tactual sense we build up a physical world, just as the infant groping toward objects is building up a world of things. The world that precedes this Mead calls a world without landscape, a world without things, a world of exteriors.[2]

The human hand and its functional capacity to touch, to grasp, and to hold objects is of vital importance in the building up of an environment. The hand fills the world with numbers of things to be manipulated and used. By means of the hand the environment is broken up, its contents varied, its objects singled out, fingered, held back, brought close. In cooperative activities with physical objects we constitute an environment of things we can get hold of, "physical things which are in a real sense the products of [our] own hands."[3]

Physical things are "defined by their boundaries, and among those things the bodily organism obtains its definition in the same fashion." In the development of the human infant the child reaches his own body as a bounded thing through the discovery of the surfaces of objects which press against his body. In this way the discovery of surfaces--of "new outsides", shows us the outside of our own bodies and these surfaces give to us a sense of our boundedness.[4] Contact with physical objects constitutes the reality of things within my grasp and gives to my body a sense of its orientation in the space it shares with other things.

The insides of things and myself.

The discovery of myself as a center of activity is another phase of contact experience. Mead calls this center of activity an "inside".[5] Just as the development of self is dependent upon the process of social communication with other selves, the primary awareness of having an "inside", a center of activity within our bodily selves, is dependent upon a social relationship with our environment. "It is only man," Mead writes, "who has entered into a social relation with his environment."[6] This relation implies that we engage in cooperative activities with objects.

There are several senses in which Mead speaks of man's cooperative relation with the physical environment. And each of these parallels his account of the communication process between selves. To enter into a relationship with an other is to be conscious of the other and in particular the response the other will make to my gestures. It means to stimulate myself to act as the other will act, and thus to understand my own gesture from the standpoint of the other I address. This entails self-perception from the other's point of view or what Mead calls taking the role or attitude of the other.

As Mead demonstrates, human communication in speech, the cooperative activity par excellence, is possible because of the capacity we have to enter into the perspective of others, to step outside of ourselves and to see the

world and notably ourselves, from the perspective of the other. Mead calls this capacity sociality-- the capacity of being several things at once. In this case, to be myself and to be another simultaneously.[7]

In his treatment of the physical object Mead speaks of the continuity that is established between the individual and the object-world-- a continuity which implies that my experience of self is bound up with physical things with which I have social relations. The experience of having an inside which Mead identifies with my center of activity, emerges as I discover the active resistance of physical objects with which I come into contact (what Whitehead calls "the pushiness of things"). This resistance is the occasion for me to grasp my own action of holding or pushing a thing from the standpoint of the object.

To experience the resistance response of objects is to experience their action in relation to me. The response of the object is the pressure which the object gives as I grasp it. It implies that I have called out in myself the sort of resistance response I am seeking in the physical thing with the sense of effort which accompanies my own response. In calling out the resistance response in the physical thing, I ask the thing to reply in terms of my own conduct. I am setting up within myself the co-operative response of the object. Mead suggests that we often overlook the cooperation which we continually seek

"in rest and movement on the slight foundation for our feet, in the mutual leverage of the organism and the objects it handles, and in general in the firmness, elasticity, and effective occupation of space by physical things that give to us the opportunity for our reactions."[9]

Mead speaks of giving the object an "inside". This inside or its center of activity springs from the co-operation of physical things with myself. It is revealed when I grasp it and elicit its response of resisting me.[10] Through the response of the thing I discover a physical object with an inside and an inherent nature. "About this fundamental core can gather the other things that an object can do to us, its efficacies, its active properties."[11] The inner resistance of the object is supplied by me. I pass on into the thing the pressure which I exert against it in grasping it. This inner resistance is not a mere projection of my own effort of pressing against the object. The object itself is the locus of pressure. The resistance is in the thing as much as the effort is in me,[12] but the resistance is there only insofar as my effort is present.[13]

This process entails self-perception from the point of view of the object. For the placing of ourselves within objects enables us to perceive other things, and notably ourselves, from the standpoint of the thing within which we have placed ourselves. The pressure which we exert on the object gives ourselves an inside just as it provides the object

with an inside. "Through the tendency to push as a physical thing against one's own hand...one has become a physical object over against the physical thing."[14]

The identification of the self and the object-world.

The world within my grasp is a world of social objects-- objects whose existence is involved in my own existence as a self. These objects, while here independent of me, imply my self. For the self-as-object is dependent upon the presence of other objects with which it can identify itself.[15] This identification of my center of activity with the center of activity which springs from the insides of things is an identity of response: the resistance character of the object is identical with the resistance character of my body-- its center of activity. When my hand presses against a table there is an experience common to the pressure of the table and my hand. It feels the same. The resistance which comes from my hand's inside is like the resistance which springs from the table's inside. And although all the senses are at work in my perception of the table-- I see the color and tone of wood, I smell the musty odor of dust and old polish-- these sense qualities cannot be identified with the responses they elicit in me.[16]

In my converse with objects in the world within my reach my own identity as a bodily thing with a center of activity is confirmed by the objects which surround me and which I use. Objects are the reflections of our precarious identities. The use and adornment of objects reinforce

identities to which I am committed, shape new identities to which I aspire, hide identities of which I am afraid.

The sense of who I am is confirmed in part by objects within my grasp. Objects provide me with a stable and familiar environment. My experience of Me is as much in things around me as it is <u>in</u> me.[18] The experience of familiarity always involves a feeling of me-ness. The feeling of familiarity is in fact the prerequisite for the experience of the unfamiliar, the new, the strange, and for the feelings and emotions associated with this experience. In children the introduction of a new object can be experienced as a disturbance of embeddedness and can produce what has been called "separation anxiety". If it is accompanied by curiosity and a desire to relate to the new, one's contact with the physical environment can be expanded and deepened and with it a sense of one's own active mastery and identification with the object-world.[19]

<u>We see things as if they could be handled</u>.

I locate my body within a world of objects. The center of that world is the center of my activity-- my "inside". This center, the center O of a system of coordinates, is the starting point from which I take my bearing in space. Within this field objects are at rest or in motion, but things which are in motion move within a field at rest. The objects which I move toward or away from are seen as if they could be handled. For while I do not contact them, I see them as hard, as soft,

as wet. They are seen as contemporaneous with contact experience.[20]

Human perception always contains a forward-looking experience of direct contact. "What is perceived is there as a promise." Its ultimate reality can only be found in contact. The object is there only if I have or could have contact with it. Otherwise it is hallucinatory. Touch provides the undeniable confrontation with the real. And for this reason the sense of touch gives me a greater feeling of certitude than any other sense. What is known through touch has most reliably the character of reality.

Language confirms that only that which has touched one or which one has touched can be fully understood and experienced. To be in touch with someone or something expresses a state of full awareness, of contact, and communication. Various expressions taken from the tactile sphere are used to describe the quality and degree of impact we feel: we are touched, impressed, shaken, struck, thrown. And when we have understood, we speak of grasping and comprehending. From another standpoint the tendency to touch something new or something desirable is not explained by a desire to have its reality confirmed. Rather it stems from the sense that touch will yield an undefined something which sight does not yield--its "inside".[22]

Social objects.

Mead suggests that the earlier and more immediate attitude we take toward physical objects is one which endows them with human attributes. It is only later that we develop the capacity to view objects as purely physical or mechanical. He points to the ability of the primitive and the child to endow things with human powers. In our age, experience of the physical environment has been subjected to the analysis and abstraction of science; physical things resist us as inert objects. For the primitive, objects are capable of many other responses which a sophisticated age regards as magical. The physical habitat, the primitive's tools and weapons can be endowed with a personality. In the attitude of the primitive "things are en rapport with us as they are friendly or unfriendly."[24]

Objects are never completely devoid of social and personal attributes.[25] A social attitude toward things can be seen in our attachment to certain objects, in our protective or amused response to small objects, in our superstitious fear of the power of other objects. I kick the chair I fell over; I fondle and grasp the object which recalls better times, loved ones. I destroy the objectsfilled with loathsome memories. I "fill" objects-- or fill up the insides of objects with emotion and memory and sometimes bestow on them powers to which I become subject. And while objects can

be effectively employed in the presentation of ourselves to others, as extensions of ourselves, as vehicles for maintaining identities, the compelling nature of objects lies in their social character: they are things whose existence is involved in our own existence as selves.

Conclusion.

Mead has long been acknowledged as a creative thinker who provided one of the clearest statements on the interrelationship between the social environment and the mental life of the individual. And for this reason his insights have proved foundational for the fields of social psychology and the sociology of knowledge. Mead's account of the individual's cognitive relationship to the physical environment can be used in both fields to provide new material for sociological reflection.[27]

To conclude this brief presentation I single out as relevant to these fields: Mead's description of the significance of tactility in the process of human development and the social construction of the bodily self; the role of the physical object in the development and maintenance of a social world; the social and cooperative nature of the self's relation to the physical world; the

significance of objects in the constitution and maintenance of social identities. Finally, Mead extends the subject matter of the sociology of knowledge in new directions in his account of the social construction of the self's center of activity. For just as he locates mind in a field of social interaction, so too the sense of self-- the "inside" of the bodily self-- emerges in a field and is constituted and reconstituted through converse with the physical world.

Notes

1. The self's relation to these three systems is central to Mead's The Philosophy of the Act edited by Charles W. Morris(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938) and The Philosophy of the Present edited by Arthur E. Murphy with prefatory remarks by John Dewey (LaSalle,Illinois: The Open Court Publishing Co.,1932). Hereinafter referred to as PA and PP respectively.

2. PA 266-67; PP 69-71;119-21; George H. Mead, Movements of Thought in the Nineteenth Century, edited by Merritt H. Moore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1936),pp. 381-82. (Hereinafter referred to as MT.)

3. George H. Mead, Mind, Self, and Society, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,1934), p.249. (Hereinafter referred to as MSS.) On the hand and the physical world see also pp.184-85; 362-63. On the hand and speech in the development of the self, p.237.

4. PP 119-22; PA 327-28.

5. Mead's account of the emergence of the "insides" of objects and selves is part of his description of the manipulative stage of the act, PA 16-22. In other manuscripts this theme is discussed in the same volume in reference to the spatiotemporal dimensions of perception: pp.103-24; 185-96; 308-12; 426-32; 440-42. Maurice Natanson provides an account of Mead's theory of the object in The Social Dynamics of George H. Mead (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1973) and treats Mead's theory of "interiorization" and "resistance", pp.30-35; 49-53.

6. PA 110.

7. Mead's treatment of sociality can be found in the three major posthumous works (MSS, PA, and PP). It plays a central role in his evolutionary model and in particular his theory of the act and its temporal dimensions. See in particular PA 654-56, 609-10; PP, chapters III and IV.

8.On the resistance response of the object: PA 108-10; 143-47; 186-94; 310-12; 426-32; PP 119-39.

9.PA 109.

10. Ibid., 143.

Notes cont.

11. PA 110.

12. PP 123; see also Natanson's account of resistance, p.50.

13. PA 310; PP 123.

14. PA 428. Cf. 188; PP 136.

15. On the identification of the self with the physical world see PA 163-64; 329-31; 428-29; PP 121-22.

16. PP 124-33.

18. PA 613.

19. This is an elaboration of Mead's account of the self's identification with the object-world and his account of the "continuity" established between the self and physical objects. For a discussion of "familiarity" see Ernest Schachtel's treatment in Metamorphosis (New York: Basic Books, 1959) pp. 149-51. Schachtel cites E. Claparède, "Recognition and 'Me-ness'" in David Rapaport, Organization and Pathology of Thought (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951), pp.58-75. Reference to "separation anxiety" is from John Bowlby's two-volume, Attachment and Loss (New York: Basic Books, 1969).

20. On Mead's use of "coordinates" to describe the location of the self in the physical world, PA 432-35. For Alfred Schutz's treatment of "the world within my reach" see his Collected Papers, Volume I (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971), pp.306-12. Mead describes perception as contemporaneous with contact experience. See PA 103-06; 121ff; 151ff; 190-92; 196-97; 282-84; PP 124ff.

21. Schachtel op. cit. 141-43.

22. Idib., 142.

23. Mead distinguishes physical from social objects: PA 292ff. On the social features of object-relations see MSS 183-84; 185-86; 280. PA 109-10; 154-55; 291-300; 310-12; 325-29; 426-32. PP 169-70. See Mead's early statement in the 1910 article, "What Social Objects Must Psychology Presuppose?" Journal of Philosophy VII(1910), pp.174-80.

Notes cont.

24. PA 154.

25. Ibid., 429-30; MSS 183-84.

26. PA 212.

27. For example, Mead's theory of the self's relation to physical objects could provide a framework for sociology's approach to adornment, fetishism, attachment, and superstition to name a few topics as yet unexplored by this discipline.

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